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SUBJECT: SENATOR LIEBERMAN MEETS LIEBERMAN

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Senator Joseph Lieberman met with Yisrael Beiteinu Party chairman Avigdor Lieberman on April 14 to discuss the political landscape in Israel. Avigdor, fresh from a negotiating session with the lead Kadima Party negotiator, Yoram Turbavitz, expressed confidence that his party would be included in the next Israeli government and that he would secure the Internal Security portfolio he seeks. In a matter-of-fact tone, Avigdor described how developments in Iran, Iraq and the Palestinian Authority could derail Acting Primer Minister Olmert's timetable for unilateral withdrawal from additional areas in the West Bank, moves which Avigdor does not support. End Summary.

Elections

¶2. (SBU) Avigdor Lieberman estimated that 65-70 percent of the Russian-speaking voters in Israel voted for his party, Yisrael Beiteinu. He attributed the party's success to its track record and the consistency of his political message, which, he claimed, "addressed what others are afraid to say." The March 28 elections did not reveal a "clear direction, left or right," in Avigdor's view. Likud voters -- particularly Sephardic voters in development towns -- were damaged by Netanyahu's policy. Consequently, many of the Likud Sephardim voted for Labor, and some voted for Shas. A corresponding number of Azkhenazi voters in the Labor party, however, switched to Kadima, in Avigdor's analysis. Avigdor said he believed it would be very difficult to achieve a stable government with a broad coalition comprising the religious parties (presumably, the two haredim parties: Shas and Shabbat and Torah Judaism), Labor, Kadima and Yisrael Beiteinu. "It will be impossible to keep the balance between the Left and Right, or take a decision on policy," Avigdor added. Despite this assessment, Avigdor reaffirmed that he believed he would serve in the next government.

Leadership

¶3. (SBU) Avigdor bemoaned the lack of Israeli leadership, harking back to the Begin era as the last example of a Prime Minister who commanded wide support. Avigdor appeared to commend Olmert for making a clear and open statement of his political direction regarding the occupied territories, but commented that he was not sure that Olmert will have the opportunity to implement his concept. Avigdor reasoned that it would take twenty months for Olmert to plan his project, and, in the meantime, the "number one problem -- Iran" would take center stage in Israel.

Iran/Iraq

¶4. (SBU) If the U.S. were to attack Iran, then Iran would not be able to attack the U.S., Avigdor assessed, pointing out, however, that Hizballah could attack Israel. He added that U.S. decisions on Iraq would also play out in a way that could negatively affect Israel: "If you leave and there is anarchy in Iraq, then the Shiites in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon will create a dangerous regional environment and the possibility of deeper coordination with a Sunni axis in Gaza, Judea and Samaria and Jordan," Avigdor posited. Senator Lieberman responded that he did not anticipate a U.S. pullout from Iraq in the foreseeable future. He asked Avigdor why the issue of Iran would complicate Olmert's convergence plan. Avigdor envisioned battles with Hizballah as a consequence that Israel would have to prepare for. Moreover, Hamas' hold on the Palestinians would strengthen over time. Avigdor expressed "no hope for democratic change" in Iran or among the Palestinians, and he dismissed the possibility that Hamas will have to rig future elections to remain in power: "They will win an open election."

Homeland Security

15. (SBU) A self-professed "do-er," Avigdor claimed that Olmert wants him to serve as the Minister of Internal Security and "make it serious, like the (U.S.) Homeland Security Department." He explained that many homeland security functions -- including drug enforcement -- are located in other ministries. The Internal Security ministry manages the Israeli national police, which, Avigdor said, lacked enough officers to deal with crime or illegal immigrants. He claimed that these illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa number some 400,000 in Israel (including, in his analysis, the occupied territories, where, he claimed, many "Jordanians" were illegally residing). Senator Lieberman mentioned his own role in spearheading the legislation that led to the creation of this department from 22 separate agencies, and offered to share his legislative experience. The Senator also described the immigration policy debate in the U.S. Congress.

Israeli Arabs and the Clash of Civilizations

16. (SBU) In response to a question posed by the Senator, Avigdor maintained that Hamas exerts a very strong influence over Israeli Arabs. Conflating Hamas with the Northern Islamic Movement in Israel, Avigdor predicted that most Arab mayors will be affiliated with Hamas after the 2008 municipal elections. "We are weak. Most Arabs and Palestinians think they will win this dispute," Avigdor commented. He went on to argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but a manifestation of the clash between fundamentalist Islam and the West. Israel is on the front line, Avigdor concluded, and "Saudi Arabia is your biggest problem: Its collapse will be more dangerous than Iraq or Iran together." The Senator affirmed that U.S. support for Israel is stronger than ever and that the American people know that the U.S. and Israel are on the same side of this very different kind of war.

17. (U) The Codel cleared this message.

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JONES